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Opening extract from

Dr Proctor's Fart Powder 3: The End of the World. Maybe.

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Published by

Simon & Schuster Children's Books

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First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Simon and Schuster UK Ltd
A CBS COMPANY

First published in the USA in 2012 by Aladdin, an imprint of
Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
as *Doctor Proctor's Fart Powder:Who Cut the Cheese?*

Originally published in Norway in 2010 as *Doktor Proktor og verdens undergang. Kanskje.*
by H. Aschehoug & Co.

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor, 222 Gray's Inn Road
London
WC1X 8HB

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

PB ISBN: 978-0-85707-389-1
eBook ISBN: 978-0-85707-390-7

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Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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World War and Hiccups

IT WAS NIGHTTIME in Oslo, Norway, and it was snowing. Big, seemingly innocent snowflakes wafted down from the sky to land on the city's roofs, streets and parks. A weatherperson would surely have explained to you that the snowflakes were just frozen rain, which came from the clouds, but the fact is that no one *really* knows for sure. Snowflakes could, for example, come from the moon, which was visible through gaps in the cloud cover and cast a magical light down over the sleeping city. The snow crystals that hit the asphalt in front of Town Hall melted immediately and ran off as water into the nearest manhole cover, dripping through its openings down into a pipe that led directly into the sewer network that crisscrossed back and forth down there, deep below Oslo.

No one was *really* sure what was actually down there in that sewer world, but if you were so dumb and brave as to climb down there on this December night, remain completely still and hold your breath, you would hear a few strange things. Water dripping, sewage gurgling, rats rustling, a frog croaking. And – if you were really unlucky – the sound of a couple of massive jaws that creaked open into a mouth the size of an inflatable swim ring, the sound of anaconda saliva dripping and then an ear-splitting snap as the orifice slammed shut. After that, it was guaranteed to be complete silence for you, my unlucky

friend. But seeing as you weren't so unlucky, you would have heard other sounds on this night, sounds that would amaze you. The sound of a waffle iron closing, of butter sizzling, voices murmuring softly, a waffle iron opening. And then: quiet chewing.

EVENTUALLY THE SNOW stopped falling, the chewing ceased and the people of Oslo started waking up to a new day, heading off through the winter dark-ness and slush to work and school. And just as Mrs Strobe started telling her students about World War II, a pale winter sun that had overslept once again cautiously peeped over the hilltop.

Lisa was sitting at her desk, looking at the board. Mrs Strobe had written the words WORLD WAR TOO up there. She had misspelled "two." And this was bothering Lisa – who liked things to be spelled correctly – so much that she wasn't quite able to concentrate on Mrs Strobe, who was talking about how the Germans had attacked Norway in 1940 and how a handful of heroes had squared things away with those Germans, so that the Norwegians had won the war and could sing, "Victory is ours, we won the war, victory is ours."

"Well, what was everyone else doing, then, huh?"

"We raise our hands when we want to ask a question, Nilly!" Mrs Strobe said sternly.

"Yes, I bet you do," Nilly said. "But I don't see how that would result in answers that were any better. My method, Mrs Strobe, is just to plunge right in and . . ." The tiny little red-haired and very freckled boy named Nilly raised a tiny little hand up in the air as if he were picking invisible apples. "Boom! Grab hold of the conversation, hang on to it, keep it under my control, give wings to my words and let them fly towards you . . ."

Mrs Strobe bent her head and stared, her eyes bulg-ing over the tops of her

glasses, which slipped yet another inch farther down her long nose. And to her alarm, Lisa saw that Mrs Strobe had raised her hand in preparation for one of her infamous desk slaps. The sound of the flesh on Mrs Strobe's hand striking wood was terrifying. It was said that it had been known to

make grown men sob and mothers cry for their mummies. Although, now that Lisa thought about it, Nilly was the one who had told her that; so she wasn't a hun-dred percent sure that it was a hun-dred percent true.

"What were the people who weren't heroes doing?" Nilly repeated. "Answer, my dear teacher, whose beauty is exceeded only by your wisdom. Answer and let us drink from the font of your knowledge."

Mrs Strobe lowered her hand and sighed. And Lisa thought she could see the corners of the woman's mouth twitching despite all her strictness. Mrs Strobe was not a lady given to overdoing smiling or any of the other sunnier facial expressions.

"The Norwegians who weren't heroes during the war," Mrs Strobe began. "They . . . uh, rooted."

"Rooted?" Nilly asked.

"They rooted for the heroes. And for the king, who had escaped to London."

"So, they did nothing," Nilly said.

"It's not that simple," Mrs Strobe replied. "Not everyone can be a hero."

"Why not?" Nilly asked.

"Why not what?" Mrs Strobe asked.

"Why can't everyone be a hero?" Nilly asked, flipping his red hair, which because of his stature was only just slightly visible above the edge of his desk.

In the silence that followed, Lisa could hear yelling and hiccuping from the classroom next door to theirs. And she knew it was the new crafts teacher, whose name was Gregory Galvanius but whom they just called Mr Hiccup because

he started hiccuping whenever he was feeling stressed out.

"Truls!" Gregory Galvanius screeched in a desperate falsetto. "*Hiccup!* Trym! *Hiccup!*"

Lisa heard the mean laugh of Truls and the almost equally mean laugh of his twin brother Trym, then footsteps running and a door being flung open.

"Not everyone has it in them to be heroes," Mrs Strobe continued. "Most people just want peace and quiet so they can go on about their business without being bothered too much by other people."

By now most of the class had stopped paying atten-tion and were staring out of the windows instead. Because they could see Truls and Trym Thrane running around out there on the snow-covered playground. It was not a pretty sight, because Truls and Trym were two very fat children, and the thighs of their trousers rubbed together as they ran. But the person chasing them wasn't any more elegant. Mr Hiccup was struggling along in the morning sunlight in a bent-over, knock-kneed trot, like a clumsy moose in fuzzy slippers. The reason he was struggling and bent over was that his desk chair appeared to have become stuck to the seat of Mr Hiccup's trousers, and he was awkwardly lugging it around with him.

Mrs Strobe looked out of the window and sighed heavily. "Nilly, I'm afraid some people quite simply are just very normal people without a speck of anything heroic in them."

"What's with that chair?" Nilly asked softly.

"Looks like someone *sewed* it onto his trousers," Lisa said with a yawn. "And uh-oh, he's almost to the icy parts. . . .

The fuzzy slippers that belonged to Gregory Galvan-ius, a.k.a. Mr Hiccup, started spinning under-neath him. And then he lost his balance and tipped backwards. Right onto his bum. And since his rear

end was sewn to the chair, and the chair had wheels, and the wheels were nicely lubricated and the school-yard sloped gently downward towards Cannon Creek, Mr Hiccup suddenly found himself an unwilling passenger on a desk chair that was rolling downhill with ever increasing speed.

"Good God!" Mrs Strobe exclaimed in alarm as she discovered her colleague's rapid journey towards the end of the world – or at least the end of school grounds.

For several seconds, it was so quiet that the only thing that could be heard was the rumbling of the chair wheels over the ice, the brushing sound of slippery slippers desperately trying to brake, plus a frantic hiccuping. Then the chair and the crafts teacher hit the snowdrift at the edge of the playground. And the drift sort of exploded with a poof, and the next instant the air was filled with powdery snow. The chair and Gregory Galvanius had disappeared without a trace!

"Man overboard!" bellowed Nilly, who leaped up and hopped from desk to desk over to the door. And everyone else followed, even Mrs Strobe, and as fast as you could count "one, two, three," everyone was outside, except for Lisa. Lisa was standing by the
chalk-board with a piece of chalk in her hand, and with her finger she erased the first *O* in TOO and wrote a *W* in its place: WORLD WAR TWO. There. Then she ran outside too.

OVER BY THE snowdrift, Mrs Strobe and another teacher were already hauling Gregory Galvanius, who was still stuck to his chair, out of the snow.

"Are you okay, Gregory?" Mrs Strobe asked.

"Hiccup!" Gregory said. "I'm blind!"

"No you're not," Mrs Strobe said, using her finger to brush away the snow that was packed inside his glasses. "There."

Galvanius blinked in confusion and then blushed when he saw her. "Oh,

hi, Rosemary – I mean, Mrs Strobe! *Hiccup!*"

"What a commotion," Lisa said to Nilly, who had been the first one on the scene, moving so fast he had been coated by the cloud of powdery white snow Galvanius had kicked up. Nilly didn't respond, just stared down at Cannon Creek.

"Is something wrong?" Lisa asked.

"I saw something down there when I got here. The snow cloud covered it."

"Covered what?" Lisa asked.

"That's what I don't know," Nilly said. "Then the snow melted, and it was gone."

Lisa sighed. "Soon we're going to have to do some-thing about your overactive imagination, Nilly. Maybe Doctor Proctor can invent some kind of imag-in-ation muffler."

Nilly blinked the snow out of his eyelashes and grabbed her hand. "Come on!" he said.

"Nilly . . . " Lisa protested.

"Come on," Nilly said, zipping up his jacket.

"We're in the middle of a class!" Lisa protested.

But that didn't sway Nilly. He just dove into the deep snow and was now sliding on his stomach down the steep slope that led to the iced-over creek.

"Nilly!" Lisa cried, wading after him. "We're not allowed to go down to the creek!"

Nilly, who was already back up on his feet again, pointed triumphantly to something in the snow.

"What is it?" Lisa asked, moving closer.

"Tracks," Nilly said. "Footprints."

Lisa looked down at what were, sure enough, deep footprints in the snow.

They continued out onto the ice, where there was only a thin layer of snow.

"Someone walked across the creek," Lisa said. "So what?"

"But look at those tracks," Nilly said. "They're not from an animal, right?"

Lisa thought about all the animal tracks they had studied in science classes over the years. Paws, claws, chicken scratch. This didn't look like any of them. So she nodded in agreement.

"And they're not from shoes or boots," Nilly said. "Mysterious . . ."

He started shuffling along, following the tracks out onto the ice.

"Wait!" Lisa cried. "What if the ice isn't . . ."

But Nilly wasn't listening. And once he made it safely to the other side, he turned around and said, "Well, are you coming or what?"

"Just because the ice held for you, it could still be too thin to hold me," Lisa whispered, scared that Mrs Strobe would see them from the playground.

"Huh?" Nilly yelled.

Lisa pointed at the ice.

Nilly responded by pointing at his head. "Use that peanut brain of yours, would you? Look at those tracks! Whatever crossed the creek here is bigger than you and me combined!"

Lisa hated it when Nilly acted like he was smarter than her. So she angrily stomped her feet in the snow a couple of times and thought about what her com-mandant father – or even worse, her commandant mother – would say when she came home from school with a note from Mrs Strobe. She knew she didn't want that at all. But she walked across the ice anyway, because that's just how it is when you're unlucky enough to happen to be best friends with a guy named Nilly.

THE TRACKS RAN in a big circle through Hazelnut Woods, which was

actually just a collection of nice trees, across Hazelnut Bridge, back to the playground, and up the stairs into the gym. Lisa and Nilly opened the door and went in.

"Look," Nilly said, pointing at the wet footprints on the floor. But the footprints got less and less clear as Lisa and Nilly walked down the hallway, through the locker rooms and finally found themselves standing in the empty gym, looking at the last traces of the footprints before they disappeared entirely.

"Their feet must have dried off," Nilly said, sniffing the air.

"What is up with *that*?" Lisa asked, looking at the marching-band banner, which was leaning up against the wall behind the gym mats and the old pommel horse. The gym was where they had band rehearsal. Nilly played the trumpet, and Lisa played clarinet. The banner for their band was blue, and their name was embroidered in yellow: DØLGEN SCHOL MARCHING BAND.

Nilly started walking towards the exit again, and Lisa scurried after him. Because even though she was a sensible, brave girl who did not at all believe in ghosts, monsters or that kind of thing ("Hah! What ten-year-old would believe in that kind of thing," she scoffed), she still didn't want to be left in the gym alone. Because there was something in there that had made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, something that wasn't right.

Back out in the playground, the headmistress was standing in front of the snowdrift asking loudly if anyone could tell her who had sewn the seat of Mr Galvanius's trousers to the chair. Nilly and Lisa stood at the top of the stairs by the door to the gym and watched the kids looking around in fear – first at the headmistress, then at Truls and Trym, who were standing shoulder to shoulder with their arms crossed, staring menacingly back at them.

"No one will ever dare to tell on Truls and Trym," Lisa said.

"I guess Mrs Strobe was right," Nilly said. "Most people just want peace and quiet so they can go about their business without being bothered too much by other people."

Right then the bell rang. And Lisa thought this was turning out to be a really strange day.

AND IT GOT even stranger in the middle of their last class. Because that's when Lisa figured out what hadn't been right. The realisation bopped her in the head like one of Truls and Trym's snowballs. The marching-band banner! The banner with the name embroidered in yellow that she had seen hundreds of times: DØLGEN SCHOOL MARCHING BAND. Only the banner they had seen that morning said DØLGEN SCHOL MARCHING BAND. One of the *O*s was missing. Lisa suddenly felt ice cold. How could that be?

THE BELL HAD rung and Lisa had dragged Nilly back into the empty gym, where they were standing, staring at the old marching-band banner. Nilly spelled his way through the letters with difficulty: "D-Ø-L-G-E-N.
S-C-H-O-O-L. M-A-R-C-H-I-N-G. B-A-N-D."

"But there was only one *O* in the word 'school' this morning!" Lisa said miserably. "Honest!"

Nilly put the tips of the fingers on both hands together and turned to face her. He said, "Hm, maybe Doctor Proctor can invent some kind of imagination muffler for you, my dear."

"I'm not imagining a thing!" Lisa yelled crossly.

Nilly gave her a friendly pat on the back. "I was just kidding. You know what the difference is between you and me, Lisa?"

"No. Wait, yes. Just about everything."

"The difference, Lisa, is that as your friend, I always believe what you say.

Completely."

"That," Lisa said, "is because the difference between you and me is that I always tell the truth."

Nilly studied the banner thoughtfully. "I think it might just be time for us to get some advice from our friends."

"We don't have any *friends*, Nilly. Aside from each other, we only have *one* friend!"

"That sounds like a whole herd of friends if you ask me," Nilly said and started tentatively whistling the trumpet melody from the "Old Ranger's March," the traditional Norwegian military march. And since he was doing that, Lisa couldn't help herself. She joined in, whistling the clarinet part.

And to the tune of the "Old Ranger's March," they marched out of school onto Cannon Avenue, past the red house where Lisa lived, past the yellow one across the street from it where Nilly lived, to the strange, crooked blue house all the way at the end of the street, almost hidden below the snowdrifts, where their only friend lived. They waded through the snow past the leafless pear tree and knocked on the door, since the doorbell was still broken.

"Doctor Proctor!" Nilly yelled. "Open up!"